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Trust building in Electoral Processes:

Institutions, Publics and Ghana's Elections in December 2024

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Abstract

Ghana elects a new President and its 9th Parliament in December 2024. Its democratic constitution, which has endured since 1992 when the 4th Republic was promulgated, has been the longest-surviving constitution since 1957. However, the bond that bind Ghanaians to their democratic processes are under immense strain as the most critical institutions necessary for upholding the inviolability of the democratic electoral process have lost public trust. The pathways towards the December 2024 elections are fraught with tensions, suspicions and acrimonious reciprocal accusations of bias, fraud and the looming threat of violence. December's vote is a referendum on the state of democracy. This is the context within which the paper asks several key questions: what are the major challenges contributing to undermining trust? To what extent do institutions matter? How can the different publics engage through participation to ensure transparent elections? To do this, the paper disaggregates the critical stakeholders and what their roles and expectations are; lays out some of the most critical challenges to the elections; and concludes with recommendations about how institutional efficacy and engaged participation can ensure violence-free, fair, credible and peaceful elections.

Keywords: Elections, institutions, publics, trust-building, violence, peacefulness.

Introduction

Ghana heads into its ninth democratic presidential and parliamentary elections on December 7th 2024. Described variously as a ‘do-or-die’ and ‘do-and-die’ affair, there is consensus among observers and analysts that this is a crucial election. The stakes are high: the incumbent party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) seeks to win an unprecedented straight third term in office, while the opposition, National Democratic Congress (NDC) has vowed to win. Caught in the middle of this tussle are the electorate since it appears there is no credible third choice. Critical institutions of state whose roles in ensuring a free, fair and credible election have lost public trust¹. Ghana’s pre-election situation demonstrates that the electorate must be key players in this election as: ‘politics is too important to be left only to politicians’.² This will, however, require robust and constant exchanges of views and ideas by a multiplicity of stakeholders, whose actions contribute to building resilient democracies.

But why is the focus on elections in 2024 critical? In the 2023 Report by the Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2024 has been characterised as a year of ‘election bonanza’, while The Economist classifies 2024 as ‘a triumphant [year] for democracy [as] more people are expected to vote in national elections in 2024 than ever before’. However, The Economist, not only qualifies but also cautions that, ‘...many elections will be problematic’. If the report by the Economist is anything to go by, it points to the criticality of trust-building in electoral processes and how institutions as well as publics are important in the December 2024 elections.

This policy paper disaggregates the critical stakeholders, their roles and public expectations; identifies the most critical challenges towards the December elections; and finally concludes by making some specific recommendations as to

how stakeholders can and must by definition deliver on their mandates to ensure the much desired and sought after free, fair, credible and peaceful elections.

The Roles of Critical Stakeholders

For the purposes of the paper, we discuss a non-exhaustive, but nevertheless, encompassing set of choices about who the critical stakeholders are. We have selected institutions but also focus on citizen engagement as critical components of the duties and responsibilities of stakeholders in ensuring accountability towards an election 2024 devoid of violence. To that end, we mention:

- the Electoral Commission;
- the Judiciary;
- political parties³;
- the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE);
- civil society organisations (CSO);
- the National Peace Council (NPC);
- the statutory security agencies, especially the Ghana Police Service, which is the constitutionally mandated institution to protect lives and property⁴. By extension, they are also the lead agency on the National Election Security Taskforce;
- the Media⁵; and
- severing and aspiring parliamentarians.

Key Challenges to Election Security

To juxtapose what these institutions and groups are expected to do, the paper disaggregates the most critical challenges that Ghana faces as it prepares for the December polls and what some selected stakeholders can do to tackle these challenges, namely:

1. Abusive and misogynistic rhetoric⁶;
2. Mis- and disinformation;
3. Threat and actual use of violence;

¹See the 2022 The Democracy Project’s survey on ‘Overall Trust in Institutions’ in Ghana

²Kofi Annan, 2016. ‘Credible and peaceful elections: a prerequisite for Africa’s progress’, 23 June, CDD

³This includes the Inter-Party Dialogue Committees

⁴See Act 350 of 1970

⁵Other critical stakeholders here include the National Media Commission, Ghana Journalists Association, Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association, Ghana Community Radio Network, Private Newspaper Publishers Association Editors Forum-Ghana

⁶‘A step forward, but no guarantee of gender-friendly policies: Female candidates spark hope in the 2020 Ghanaian elections’- The Nordic Africa Institute (uu.se) Diana Hojlund Madsen and Kajsa Adu

4. Monetisation of Politics⁷

5. The easy availability of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), which has surged from 240,000 in 2004 to 2.3 million in 2014⁸.

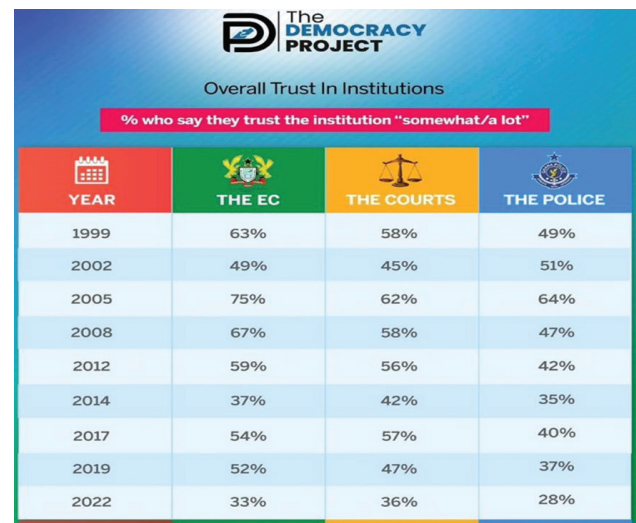
6. Politics of hate speeches, insults, ridicule and innuendos: These perpetuate a culture of the other, division and creates a heated political environment that makes it difficult to find common ground. Such challenges lead to the the politics of cynicism and reduced citizen engagement; and

7. Institutional weaknesses and loss of trust.

We argue that, in democracies and most crucially in sharply divisive and partisan political environments, elections can easily be the tipping point that unleashes forces that are difficult to control. And herein lies the importance of institutions: We phrase this as a question. Do Institutions Matter? How can institutional diversity and change in Ghana's Fourth Republic be managed? We argue that institutions do matter⁹, as a result, for the purposes of the paper; we focus on four institutions, namely: the Media, Judiciary, the Electoral Commission, and the law enforcement agencies.

We focus on these institutions because there is a synergistic and symbiotic relationship among them. This requires that, they need to work together as stakeholders within the structures of the rules and guidelines for delivering the public services expected of them. Their actions, which must be characterised by the values of inclusivity, transparency and accountability and strict adherence to the rule of law and not rule by law. As at November 2024, three of the most critical institutional stakeholders, namely the Judiciary, law enforcement and the Electoral Commission are facing a crisis of trust and credibility based on the 2023 results of The Democracy Project's report in which all these institutions are showing historically low figures

for public trust. This raises broader stakeholder concerns because democracies, and especially during contested elections, institutions must not rule by law.



Source: *The Democracy Project, 2023.*

With the Electoral Commission, Judiciary and the Ghana Police Service, which leads the Election Security Taskforce having lost public trust, the role and performance of the fourth realm of the state, namely the media, becomes even more critical. A free and independent media, we argue is a critical foundation of democracy. They contribute to stimulating political debate and inform the citizenry. Equally importantly, the media is an imperative for credible elections, as it fosters the free exchange of ideas and provides information on the electoral process. This includes political parties, candidates and their platforms. Taking into consideration the institutional challenges mentioned above, we want to focus on how the media as critical stakeholders together with civil society groups can contribute to reducing the looming threats posed, particularly by misinformation, disinformation and propaganda narratives presented as snake-oil charm.

⁷There is an increasing tendency of monetising politics – especially during election periods, and is illustrated by the hand-outs that is characterised as 'the cocoa season' for the electorate (Bauer & Darkwah 2019). A Westminster Foundation for Democracy 2018 report documented that expenditures on parliamentary elections on average have increased 90% from the 2012 to 2016 election. Cost of politics have increased as a result of Ghana's clientelistic relations, captured in the report as unaccounted 'other costs' related to 'giving gifts' or other 'expressions of gratitude'.

⁸Pokoo, J. M., & Jaye, T. (2014). Addressing the Challenges of Small Arms Availability in Ghana: A Security/Development Dilemma? A Report on Small Arms Baseline Study on Ghana. Accra: Ghana National Commission on Small Arms.

⁹Salihu, N & Aning, K. (2013). Do Institutions Matter? Managing Institutional Diversity and Change in Ghana's Fourth Republic', KAIPTC Policy Brief, No. 10.

The Media as a Bastion for Democracy

With the upsurge in available media outlets in Ghana, mis- and disinformation campaigns have become a component of electioneering and campaign messaging. Fact-checking has become a victim of the drive to make political capital irrespective of the consequences. This poses a present danger to creating a space within which the electorate can make qualified decisions and choices based on the available information. The nature of political discourses in 2024 points to the disturbing presence of this phenomenon.

The media has been described by Josephine Nkrumah as ‘oxygenic’ to Ghana’s democracy¹⁰. The art of political campaigning to garner votes is predominantly based on speeches dispensed by those who seek to convince their listenership in their quest for power, using any means that targets a broad spectrum of potential voters becomes key, and it is in this sense that the media is an important institution. Therefore, this makes both the spoken and written words important and lies the critical institutional role the media plays in possibly limiting or expanding: (a) misinformation; and (b) disinformation.

Misinformation is the inadvertent spread of false information without intent to harm, while disinformation is false information designed to mislead others and is deliberately spread with the intent to confuse fact and fiction. However, disinformation can turn into misinformation when spread by unwitting readers who believe the material. In the Ghanaian political and other contexts, misinformation is more than ‘false news’. In fact, there are multiple ways in which claims are made that seek to distort reality and the complexity of misinformation and can manifest in various forms as depicted below:

Types / Forms of claims	Details
<i>Satire</i>	<i>A factual claim that originated as satire but is understood to be true</i>
<i>Mislabelled or misattributed</i>	<i>A factual claim, often an image or statement, that is labelled or attributed in ways that distort understanding</i>
<i>Misleading</i>	<i>A factual claim that bears some truth but lacks crucial context or detail and so distorts understanding</i>
<i>Overstated or understated</i>	<i>A factual claim that overstates or understates the level or scale of a position</i>
<i>Unproven</i>	<i>A factual claim for which no definitive proof is publicly available</i>
<i>Conflated</i>	<i>A factual claim that conflates issues in a way that distorts understanding</i>

Authors' compilation. ¹¹

Misinformation affects the generality of people and the electorate as it undermines trust in politics, threatens public order and, in some instances, creates disaffection, suspicion and lays the foundation for violence. Misinformation is not restricted to traditional and social media. Deliberate false claims can be spread in public speeches, in parliament, on posters and through other forms of messaging. Some examples of how these forms threaten the 2024 elections are provided below:

¹⁰Promoting Peaceful Elections in Ghana: A 10-Point Recommendation by Key Stakeholders', at

<https://mfwa.org/country-highlights/promoting-peaceful-elections-in-ghana-a-10-point-recommendation-by-key-stakeholders/>

¹¹With data from: M. J. O'Brien and Izzat Alsmadi. 2021. 'Misinformation, disinformation and hoaxes: What's the difference?',

<https://theconversation.com/misinformation-disinformation-and-hoaxes-whats-the-difference-158491> April 21; Broda, E., & Strömbäck, J. (2024). Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news: lessons from an interdisciplinary, systematic literature review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 48(2), 139–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2024.2323736>

Forms of misinformation	Explanations	Examples
Politics, politicians and elections	False claims referring to the election processes, results, politicians' views or activity, public opinion or support, political appointments and more	Mahama's campaign promise to review and improve the free Senior High School (SHS) policy which was misinterpreted by the NPP that he will cancel the policy when he is voted into power ¹²
Gender	False claims with misogynistic attributes and status of gender, gender violence, ethnicity, code of dress, marriage laws and other relevant codes of behaviour which confirm the stereotype against women especially those aspiring to greater heights in political leadership,	Madam Jane Naana Opoku-Agyeman as the 'target of coordinated gendered disinformation' ¹³ . Attacks on the personality of the NDC's Vice presidential candidate where she is labelled variously as 'old', 'grandma', 'witch' and 'spinster'. In 2016, Assin Central Member of Parliament (MP) Kennedy Agyapong alleged on a campaign platform that Mrs. Charlotte Osei, the then EC Chairperson traded her body for her position. ¹⁴ Presently Mrs. Jean Mensah (the EC Chairperson) has literally been accused of 'being in bed with the former / present government' due to challenges with the voter register and a lack of trust in the EC.
Sex and sexuality	False claims that relate norms of sexual behaviour, status of different sexual relationships, sexual behaviour, different genders	
Governance	False claims around government achievements, spending, behaviour, cost of or access to services and cost of governance	Claims that NPP used propaganda and slogans to win both 2016 and 2020 general elections ¹⁵
State of the country (infrastructure and development)	False claims on state of infrastructure (roads, education, health and electricity)	NPP accused of engaging in politics of lies over claims that in the past seven years, they constructed over 12,000 kilometres of roads across the country ¹⁶

Source: Authors' Compilation

¹²Tamakloe, L. M. (2024, September 24). Menace of misinformation: Understanding the threats and consequences on election outcomes. Retrieved from myjoyonline:

<https://www.myjoyonline.com/menace-of-misinformation-understanding-the-threats-and-consequences-on-election-outcomes/>

¹³Asante, K. K. (2024, March 29). How misinformation will be gender-based in Ghana's upcoming elections. Retrieved from Poynter: <https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2024/how-misinformation-will-be-gender-based-in-ghanas-upcoming-elections/>

¹⁴Peacefm. (2016, June 28). MFWA: Sex-For-EC - Job Claim Misogynistic. Retrieved from <https://www.peacefonline.com/pages/politics/politics/201606/283774.php>

¹⁵CDA Consult. (2024, November 14). NPP government is major source of disinformation and misinformation – GFL. Retrieved from Modern Ghana: <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1357044/npp-government-is-major-source-of-disinformation.html>

¹⁶Arhinful, E. K. (2024). I'll audit all new roads constructed by Akufo-Addo government – Mahama. September 16 Retrieved from myjoyonline: <https://www.myjoyonline.com/ill-audit-all-new-roads-constructed-by-akufo-addo-government-mahama/>

Misinformation and disinformation can be perpetuated by the failure of some traditional media houses to verify and validate news content before dissemination¹⁷. In a bid to reach a wider audience, some traditional media houses also tend to rely on social media for news production, which may lead to these media houses affirming false news¹⁸. The media can however curb misinformation and disinformation by maintaining standards of accuracy, fairness and balance in news reportage; building the capacity of media personnel as well as providing a platform for fact-checking and public education on false news.

Towards an Inclusive, Engaged Trusted Process

A cursory examination of Ghana's democratic journey and search for peacefulness points to the fact that, there are several critical issues that needs reflection. For instance, in Ghana's search for inclusive governance and electoral effectiveness, there is the challenge of citizens' apathy, lack of trust in the institutional processes and the under-representation of women, persons with disability (PWDs) and the youth¹⁹. Here, we discuss briefly what CSOs and individuals as stakeholders can do. Democracies depend on the active and informed involvement of citizen participation in the political process, contributing to buy-in and credibility.

Limited popular participation is inimical to creating resilience and sustainability as it gives way to a system of government where elites, powerful special interest

groups, and unrepresentative coalitions make decisions for everyone else. Participation²⁰, therefore, becomes important in this context. This refers to the involvement and cooperation of individuals or groups in development and decision processes and includes both taking part and having a say. Stakeholder Political participation focuses in particular on activities affecting politics; and includes, among other actions:

- (a) such as casting a vote or addressing a political representative in contrast to passive behavior as vwatching political debates on TV;
- (b) by private citizens as opposed to politicians or lobbyists, for example;
- (c) not enforced or required by law but voluntary action; and
- (d) aimed at the political system by influencing either the selection of (governmental) personnel or their actions and decisions.

CSO stakeholder political participation refers to the voluntary activities by private citizens that aim directly or indirectly at the political system or processes, in this case, election 2024.

¹⁷Ahiabenu, K., Ofosu-Peasah, G., & Sam, J. (2018,). Media Perspectives on Fake News in Ghana. May 2. Retrieved from penplusbytes: <https://penplusbytes.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/FAKE-NEWS-STUDY.pdf>

¹⁸Media Foundation for West Africa. (2024). Stakeholders identify three main drivers of mis/disinformation in Ghana. March 24. Retrieved from MFWA:

<https://mfwa.org/issues-in-focus/stakeholders-urge-tech-giants-govt-to-attend-to-mis-disinformation-situation-in-ghana/>

¹⁹<https://gna.org.gh/2023/08/citizens-apaty-affecting-local-governance-electoral-process-cdd-ghana/>

²⁰Nissen, S. (2021). Political Participation: Inclusion of Citizens in Democratic Opinion-Forming and Decision-Making Processes. In: Leal Filho, W., Marisa Azul, A., Brandli, L., Lange Salvia, A., Özuyar, P.G., Wall, T. (eds) Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95960-3_42

Conclusion

Since 1992, politics have been characterised by often chaotic actions both with intended and unintended outcomes. As Busumuru Kofi Annan argued, 'democracy depends on the lively participation of organised civil society in politics. Ghana's future for 2024 is what is on the ballot,

and will be secured with active participation. Such engagements will bring trust, honesty and integrity back into public life.

Recommendations

- There is a need to strengthen the integrity of institutions of accountability and
- focus on what matters to citizens by prioritising the effectiveness of those institutions and public officials most relevant and present in the lives of ordinary citizens.

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